2021

"One Singular Sensation": Integrating Personal Narratives into the Honors Classroom

Marc Napolitano

Mimi Killinger

Honors in Practice 17 (2021)

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Marc Napolitano and Mimi Killinger
United States Air Force Academy

Abstract: Contemporary emphases on standardization, specialization, and selectivity in higher education alienate students and teachers from their own creativity, intellectual curiosity, and personal stories. This trend runs counter to the central focus of honors on fostering a diverse, scholarly learning environment. Authors suggest that integrating student personal narratives into honors curricula reinforces its values of multiplicity, inclusivity, and meaningful learning. Using metaphorical reference to the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* as a unique lens into the pedagogical benefits of such integration, this essay provides ways of incorporating and sharing personal narratives in the classroom and offers strategies to ensure that all honors students find individual connections between the material and themselves. Asserting that all students hold a unique place "on the line," authors show how integrating their personal narratives can subvert alienation and help create the rich, variegated academic experiences that are the hallmarks of honors pedagogy.

Keywords: transgressive learning; inclusive education; narrative inquiry (research method); University of Maine (ME)—Honors College; United States Air Force Academy (USAFA)—Academy Scholars Program

Citation: *Honors in Practice*, 2021, Vol. 17:131–44

While I was working as an instructor at the United States Military Academy (West Point) from 2010 to 2015, one of my duties was organizing the English department's placement exam. Incoming cadets could test out of English 101 (Composition) and move directly into an advanced section of English 102 (Literature). I would reserve a large theatre in the central academic building as our testing site, and in the summer of 2014, while watching

the students file into the auditorium and past the stage, I noted that the cadets were effectively "auditioning" for a coveted English 102 slot. "Perhaps I should require them to bring in a headshot next year," I whispered to a colleague, recalling the iconic opening number of the musical *A Chorus Line*: "God, I hope I get it! / I hope I get it!/ How many people does he need?"

Were I not such a passionate devotee of musical theatre, I might have dismissed this humorous comparison without a second thought, but instead I found myself reflecting on more parallels, particularly in the narrative trajectory of *A Chorus Line*. The musical delves into the personal histories of seventeen unique and diverse dancers, but the closing number sees the dancers don identical outfits and form a homogeneous dance line. The song is not so subtly entitled "One," and while the dancers move as a single unit in matching gold tailcoats and top hats, distinguishing one dancer from another becomes increasingly difficult. Recalling the memorable image of the final kick-line, I immediately connected it to the image of the "long grey line" of cadets marching as one unit, the uniqueness of the individual students lost amid the uniformity and conformity of the group. However, I knew the cadets as individuals and understood that, as in the case of *A Chorus Line*, there was far greater diversity within the group than one might imagine. The connection between the long grey line and *A Chorus Line* stuck with me when I took the position of Director of Faculty Development at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in 2016. Each summer during New Faculty Orientation, I share the metaphor and remind new USAFA colleagues that even though the USAFA cadets dress the same and frequently move as one, they have their own distinctive stories.

As a Distinguished Visiting Professor in the USAFA Scholars Program, Mimi Killinger was intrigued by my 2018 Summer New Faculty Orientation metaphor. Subsequently, over the course of the fall term, she had her students share their stories in a variety of ways. I had convinced her that integrating personal narratives into Scholars or honors classes would foster diversity, promote inclusivity, and stimulate meaningful learning as we see happen in *A Chorus Line*. Learning activities involving personal narratives in the college classroom seemed especially suited to honors given the honors commitment to nurturing student "creativity, collaboration, and leadership" within a close community of faculty and students; honors offers courses and programs that, by design, encourage students to develop a deeper and more complex sense of their selves and narratives within their intellectual and social contexts ("About NCHC").

Furthermore, by focusing on students as individuals within an academic collective, honors specifically subverts problematic contemporary emphases in higher education on standardization, specialization, and selectivity. These emphases frequently alienate students and instructors from their own creativity, intellectual curiosity, and personal stories; moreover, they run counter to fostering, for example, a diverse scholarly honors community. As an antidote to such standardization and its concomitant academic alienation, we propose integrating student personal narratives into honors classes to promote the multiplicity, inclusivity, and meaningful learning that honors educators value and provide. Thus, Killinger and I remain committed to integrating students' personal narratives into classes at our current institutions, the University of Maine Honors College and USAFA respectively.

THE TEMPTATION TO STANDARDIZE AND THE BENEFITS OF TRANSGRESSING

A Chorus Line celebrates the director's unique approach to the casting process and his nontraditional method for auditioning dancers. This unconventionality parallels the transgressive educational philosophies of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and other theorists whose concept of teaching and learning directly contradicts the principles of labor management that have profoundly shaped higher education. In her 2017 monograph *The New Education*, Cathy N. Davidson stresses the urgent need for reform in American higher education, contending that Frederick Winslow Taylor's late-nineteenth-century research on scientific labor measurement redefined key elements of higher education in narrow ways. Much as Taylorism stressed the division of labor, higher education has become divided into countless disciplines and subdisciplines (Davison 38–39). Maduakolam Ireh boldly asserts that "no other strategy, theory, framework or principle of management has negatively influenced educational management and efforts to improve schools in America as scientific management did and, to some extent, continues to do so" (9). The divvying up and narrowing of the academy was rooted in the categorization of students (and potential students) based on standardized testing: "It is no wonder that the same era that produced all of these interrelated institutional features of higher education also invented 'giftedness' and 'learning disabilities'" (41), writes Davidson. She laments that despite contemporary research on the myriad approaches to teaching and learning, Taylorist principles still exert tremendous influence in higher education as evidenced by

the continued hegemony of standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, and by the continued prescription of certain types of teaching/classroom-management techniques, like separating thinking from doing (Ireh 12).

Given that the United States came of age in the throes of the industrial era, it stands to reason that its educational institutions would reflect those values. Still, it is unlikely that even Taylor could have imagined the applicability of these principles on the musical stage. In one of the only peer-reviewed articles published on *A Chorus Line*, Victor Holtcamp analyzes the "philosophical" connection between industrial capitalism and the Broadway dance-line; he notes that both emphasize "interchangeability, repeatability, efficiency, rationality, and centralized control" (76). Holtcamp goes so far as to state that "if Frederick Winslow Taylor were to write a musical it just might be *A Chorus Line*, though he might have named it *An Assembly Line*" (83). Holtcamp may be overstating the matter since *A Chorus Line* deliberately questions and frequently subverts the principles he has listed. The means for achieving this subversion involve the sharing of personal narratives, a strategy that several progressive educational advocates like bell hooks and Mary Rose O'Reilley have also stressed as necessary reform in higher education, promoting the exchange of personal narratives as a meaningful pedagogical technique.

When the dancers in *A Chorus Line* share their personal narratives, some choose to focus on their educations. The most memorable example emphasizes the negative effects of a standardized pedagogical approach, especially with nontraditional students. In a lengthy solo number, one of the dancers—Diana Morales—recounts her tenure as a student at the High School of Performing Arts. Though eager to learn, Diana immediately makes a bad impression on her high school acting instructor, Mr. Karp; he proceeds to humiliate her in front of her classmates as she struggles with the first lesson's improvisation activities. The song—entitled "Nothing"—cleverly traces the evolution of Diana's concept of "nothingness" over the course of her time with Karp. Upon realizing that Diana (ostensibly) has nothing to contribute to the class, Karp and the other students make her feel like nothing, but after some reflection and spiritual affirmation, Diana realizes that Karp and his course are nothing in the grand scheme of her development. She thus enrolls in a different acting class and has a much more positive experience. The number concludes on a darkly humorous note when Diana reveals that Karp died a few months later: "I dug right down to the bottom of my soul . . . /And cried. / 'Cause I felt nothing."

By embarrassing Diana and encouraging her classmates to find fault with her attempts at improvisation, Diana's acting teacher misses out on an

opportunity to make his classroom more inclusive. Relying on one type of acting exercise, he does not give Diana the opportunity to connect with the class through a different activity nor to frame the class in relation to her life experiences. This failure is particularly disturbing given that Diana is a minority student. Karp—by relying on traditional teaching methods and activities in his very specialized high school—does not consider how best to integrate nontraditional students into the learning experience, creating a situation that is all too common in contemporary higher education as well. In their recent article on "Opening Doors to Engage a More Diverse Population in Honors," Giovanna E. Walters, Angel Jill Cooley, and Quentina Dunbar note the importance of "mak[ing] space in [honors] courses and co-curricular programing for highly motivated students who are not currently enrolled in the honors program, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented communities" (56). Karp does the opposite by wielding the exclusivity of his ostensibly advanced class like a weapon and alienating a highly motivated, nontraditional student.

Diana engages in a much more meaningful educational experience over the course of *A Chorus Line* as she participates in a remarkable (and transgressive) audition to be part of a dance line in an upcoming Broadway show. Ultimately, the audition is an inclusive experience as the diversity of a unique group of individuals is celebrated. This diversity is deliberately ironic since a dance line is typically composed of dancers who all look, act, dress, and move in the same way, as in an assembly line where diversity and individualism are antithetical to what the director, Zach, is trying to create. Zach's nonlinear and nontraditional audition emphasizing individualism and self-expression is contrary to the essential tenets of being a chorus dancer. Indeed, from a Taylorist perspective, Zach's audition is terribly inefficient.

Zach's aspirations run deeper than efficiency, as do our aspirations in honors. Like honors educators, he wants to put together a group that is capable of functioning as a unit but that is made up of diverse, motivated individuals who will learn from one another and help each other grow. His innovative, non-Taylorist audition process in *A Chorus Line* can serve as a metaphor for a model honors classroom where the diversity of a unique group of individuals is encouraged through personal narratives that promote creativity and confidence, cultivate empathy within the group, and engage in collaborative learning. Likewise, in the honors classroom the diversity of the individual students should be celebrated through the sharing of personal narratives so as to foster collaborative, empathic learning within a multicultural honors community that thrives on diversity.

In *A Chorus Line*, the director turns the stage over to the dancers and focuses on creating opportunities for expression and learning rather than simply demonstrating dance steps for them to follow. Similarly, the honors professor, rather than simply transferring content knowledge, should focus on creating opportunities for expression and learning so that students feel personally connected to, and invested in, both the course and each other's success. The director in *A Chorus Line*, furthermore, allows the dancers to use different means of expression in conveying their personal narratives, including dance, song, and monologue. In the honors classroom the professor should similarly create various opportunities and conduits for personal expression, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge and learning in ways that reflect the diverse backgrounds of the group.

Finally, the audition is a transformative experience in *A Chorus Line*. Even those who are not cast in the show are forever changed because of the opportunities the director gives them. The honors class should also be a transformative experience. Even those students who do not receive an A should be positively affected and changed because of the opportunities the professor has given them.

Measurements and categorizations that can narrow and constrain higher education can be supplanted by a broader, transgressive valuing of the individual story within the collective experience. Creating classroom opportunities to include and prize narratives, thereby fostering transformational learning, can enable honors instructors to achieve a central pedagogical goal of honors: helping students develop a more nuanced sense of self within their intellectual and social context ("About NCHC").

THE POWER OF THE PERSONAL

The notion of the audition as a learning experience has numerous implications for the college classroom in general and for the honors classroom in particular. Empowering honors students to take ownership of their education is an essential responsibility of the honors instructor. Richard Holt, in "Forever Home: A Multilevel Approach to Fostering Productive Transgression in Honors," frames empowerment as part of the transgressive role of the honors instructor. Although he does so primarily in the context of social activism (28), transgression can also be understood in the context of meaningful learning. That is, if instructors are to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and to become lifelong learners, they must often be willing to flout convention. Zach's audition process violates all conventional wisdom;

he openly tells the dancers that he does not want them to perform but instead wants them to be themselves, a statement that goes beyond the realm of transgressive and enters the sphere of counterintuitive. Still, Zach fundamentally believes that the performers who are most comfortable and confident being themselves will give the best performance on stage.

The dancers are understandably thrown by Zach's techniques, and they initially resist his efforts. When asked to reflect on and share their personal narratives, most of the dancers prefer to make up funny stories or go into a routine of some kind. Some erect emotional barriers; a noteworthy example is the unrevealing and intensely assertive Sheila, who deflects Zach's questions with flirtatious statements and dismissive jokes. Similarly, Holt notes, "honors students tend to resist transgression, possibly because honors undergraduates have won the academic game largely by not transgressing beyond conventional instruction" (33). This reality finds a believable parallel in *A Chorus Line* as the dancers assume personas as a safe alternative to sharing personal narratives; Mike's tough guy Italian-American persona, Bobby's flamboyant and campy gay comic persona, or Sheila's hard-edged *femme fatale* persona reveal the dancers' preference of surface-level engagement to deep reflection and self-disclosure.

Nevertheless, like the transgressive honors instructor who achieves meaningful learning, Zach manages to bring out the best in his dancers by helping them learn more about themselves through nontraditional practices. The audition becomes more than a "tryout" but instead a transformative learning experience as Zach prompts the dancers to synthesize different experiences rather than simply treating the audition like an independent event. Much like first-year honors students, "they are consistently amazed when they discover that they are not expected to simply recite the correct answer but to think, and to think for themselves" (Kidwell 255). What is noteworthy about the audition in *A Chorus Line* is the emphasis on integration as Zach asks the dancers to share meaningful past experiences and to let those experiences shape their audition. All the while, he is directing them to think about the future, and in the final moments of the show, he prompts them to wrestle with difficult questions about what they will do with their lives and careers when they inevitably have to give up dancing.

The world of the audition is significantly larger than it would be had he simply asked the dancers to read lines or demonstrate dance steps. Similarly, in academia educators and students are sometimes so focused on present tasks that the students' past and future are neglected: "To focus on the place we are now [. . .] is to ask students to ignore the material realities that brought

them to the university in the first place" (Robillard 80). Honors educators can learn a lesson from Zach: by prompting the dancers to reflect on what has led them to this particular moment in their careers and their lives, Zach helps the dancers synthesize past and present, thus empowering them to "kiss today goodbye" and "point [themselves] toward tomorrow" during the penultimate number.

Such synthesis and empowerment are central to discussions of critical honors pedagogy. When students view the professor as the source of all knowledge and power, they typically focus on trying to please the professor without making waves or taking risks; like the dancers, they assume personas or keep their heads down. Ironically, by getting the dancers to be vulnerable in sharing their stories, Zach empowers them to be more confident, passionate, and creative throughout the audition process. Personal narrative is not merely a means of expressing one's story but also of knowing oneself, and through this knowledge honors students can assert greater ownership of and responsibility for their education. Personal narratives also make it easier to build further knowledge by synthesizing new learning experiences with old experiences and with an overarching sense of self. Such ideas are essential to bell hooks's theories of self-actualization and engaged pedagogy (18–19). As Amy E. Robillard puts it, "Don't we want to encourage our students to create their own meaning from their own histories, thereby allowing themselves to entertain some sense of control over their educations and their lives?" (76). Integration and empowerment are strongly connected, and personal narratives—with their emphasis on reflection and synthesis—can empower honors students to find greater meaning in their learning experiences.

We offer the following examples, along with theoretical underpinnings, of in-class activities for incorporating personal narratives into the honors classroom. Small honors classes are especially conducive to integrating the four activities that we describe here. Activity 1 is "Invisible Knapsack," an ice-breaker exercise during which the instructor asks honors students to share, beyond basic introductions, something in their "invisible knapsacks," as described in Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." McIntosh defines the "invisible knapsack" as an intrinsic package of assets, provisions, or qualities available to us that are defining but not overtly apparent, like white privilege. The instructor can periodically refer back to the contents of students' invisible knapsacks throughout the course in an effort both to build community and to emphasize the unique and important qualities that each student brings to the class. A theoretical argument in

support of this exercise might be bell hooks's encouraging instructors to see students as "whole" human beings who are seeking understanding beyond books, wanting "knowledge about how to live in the world" (15). hooks's whole student theory is rooted in Paulo Freire's call for liberatory pedagogy, and the invisible knapsack exercise fosters a sense of understanding the whole student, whose personal qualities inform learning in a liberatory way.

Activity 2 is "'Unpacking the Why' Notecard," in which the honors instructor, in preparation for students' choosing writing topics, asks students to submit responses to three questions: What are you exceptionally good at? What does this say about you? Why is this so? The instructor gives a personal example that is surprising, honest and emotionally charged, perhaps inspiring students to do the same and modeling how their responses might inform their paper topics, prompting them to write about what truly matters to them. Daniela Gachago et al., in "All Stories Bring Hope Because Stories Bring Awareness," describe the benefits of creating an "emotionally-charged space of engagement" for students (9). They depict the typical classroom as socially segregated from such stories, arguing that integrating charged personal stories can heighten awareness and change assumptions. This deliberative work can deepen student critical perspectives and make written work more authentic and reflective, which is our honors goal.

"Personal Narrative and Global Issues" is Activity 3, in which the instructor asks the students to submit a description of a global issue of particular concern to them, requiring students to employ the personal "I" in preparation for doing the same in the final writing project that will link back to their global concerns. Similarly, Jacob Kramer, in "Revisiting the Personal Essay," refers to advantages in having students write in their own voices and notes how sympathy arises through personal, individual comparisons to others' stories.

Finally, Activity 4 is "A Literary Memoir," through which honors students create their autobiography by reflecting on books they have read previously. This activity could take place early or late in the semester as students select the five or more texts, which might include novels, poems, plays, and biographies, that most pronouncedly affected their development and then synthesize their reflections into a personal narrative. They further translate their experience with one of these books into a performance or artistic representation of some kind, selecting a medium that they find personally meaningful and relevant. Robillard, in "It's Time for Class," stresses that personal narratives promote integration between past and present experiences, creating a sense of empowerment about the future (76). Gachago et al. note that personal narratives

promote "a predominantly positive outlook for [students'] future, which emphasizes the importance of such projects to unleash the power of creativity and resilience" (9).

FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH THE SHARING OF NARRATIVES

The honors classroom offers countless ways of incorporating and sharing personal narratives that underscore a vital component of inclusive teaching: adopting a wide array of pedagogical methods and assessments to ensure that all honors students in the course find a way to connect with the material (Samuels 73). Zach's inclusive strategies in *A Chorus Line* demonstrate this strategy as the dancers are allowed to share their narratives through various media and methods: Diana sings a solo number about her negative experiences with Mr. Karp; Paul gives a lengthy and confessional monologue about being molested as a child, his anxieties about his parents' knowledge of his sexual identity, and his work as a drag performer; Sheila, Maggie, and Bebe share a number about their unhappy childhoods and the solace they found "At the Ballet"; Cassie engages in a solo dance that encapsulates the centrality of dancing to her identity.

We must address, however, a noteworthy caveat: personal narratives, if assigned haphazardly or unthinkingly, can be a problematic violation of students' privacy. Critical pedagogy, which lends itself to the use of personal narratives as learning tools, is steeped in postmodern theory, so it invariably addresses Foucauldian issues of surveillance (Friedman). The Foucauldian line of reasoning could assert that personal narratives ultimately lack truth. The writer—and autobiographical subject—"even when [she] is not subjected to public scrutiny, such as when she is engaged in self-writing, . . . performs as if her thoughts and actions were under surveillance" (Friedman). Zach must deal with similar issues during the audition, as the dancers know they are under surveillance: they are sharing their stories in front of director Zach, choreographer Larry, and the rest of the group. However, Zach can detect when they are going into "performance mode," and he continuously forces them to reorient themselves toward a more truthful reflection on and representation of their life stories.

Still, Zach's forcefulness is a problematic element of his character. For all his insights into the benefits of personal narratives, Zach is a dispassionate and dictatorial teacher. He does not allow the dancers to question his way of doing things; he rarely displays any emotion when reacting to their stories,

thus coming across as aloof; and he does not participate in the confessional narratives. The only reason we learn anything about Zach is that he has a past connection with Cassie, one of the most notable characters. Zach knows he does not have to be vulnerable because, as the director, he holds the power.

Holtcamp is critical of Zach and ultimately sees a sinister agenda behind his experiment with personal narratives: "The sadness comes when one considers [the dancers'] impersonal, replaceable position in that line [and understands] that the emotionally flaying audition process they went through is primarily useful so that Zach can know the best way to manipulate them to conform to an exact, external standard" (85). Though personal narratives are meant to be an inclusive tool to help counteract industrial standardization, Holtcamp claims that "Taylor—the proponent of the singular, ultimate method for anything—would likely have loved 'One' with its established hierarchy, unitary focus, and dogmatically correct way of dancing" (85).

Zach's aloofness is also problematic given that many of the personal narratives in *A Chorus Line* deal with difficult—perhaps even traumatic—experiences. One of the benefits of using personal narratives as learning tools is that whether students choose to write on traumatic or positive experiences, their reflection on and writing about life experiences can be therapeutic (Friedman). Still, to achieve these therapeutic results, students need guidance and mentorship. Moreover, as bell hooks astutely observes, "Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive" (21).

Some educators administer surveys in class to prevent a sense of surveillance or coercion, checking in with students to make sure they are comfortable with the disclosure that often accompanies personal narratives. Friedman gives students a choice about whether to share their personal narrative with the entire class; she also builds toward the larger personal narrative assignments with private journal entries so that students can receive feedback and take time to reflect on which journal entries they want to expand into full-length papers to share with the rest of the class. Honors instructors should consider these and other precautions given the valued closeness of our honors communities and, in turn, the shared vulnerabilities ("About NCHC").

CONCLUSION

A Chorus Line is a rebellious musical that offers honors educators a unique lens on the pedagogical benefits of integrating personal narratives into the classroom. My 2014 ruminations over the uniformity, yet diversity,

of West Point cadets convinced me that each of our students holds a unique place "on the line." Moreover, Killinger and I contend that college instructors, especially those of us in honors, would do well to note the ways that students' personal narratives can subvert standardization and, in turn, foster more inclusive, meaningful, intellectual engagement for our students. Wary of the residual, narrowing effects of Taylorist principles that still shape higher education today, we recommend adopting strategies for, and theoretical arguments in support of, incorporating students' personal narratives into the honors classroom, bolstering our fundamental honors commitment to diversity, to deep learning, and to "One" another.

Public release number PA#: USAFA-DF-2020-287

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The authors may be contacted at

margaret.killinger@maine.edu.